

Introduction

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Hegel's Theory of Absolute Spirit as Aesthetic Theory

Abstract: Hegel's philosophy of art is to the present day one of the most influential and attractive parts of his philosophy. In my contribution I argue for the thesis that art is not alone – together with religion and philosophy – an important figure of the absolute spirit. Much more than that, art as a complex expression of human culture is even the central form in which spirit understands itself. In contrast to Hegel's argumentation in the *Encyclopedia*, but in accordance with his *Lectures on Aesthetics* this can be seen in all aspects of difference associated with beautiful art.

1 A brief preliminary approach to Hegel's theory of absolute spirit

A fine paradox: On the one hand expressions like “absolute knowledge”, “absolute spirit”, even “spirit” could and can bring the whole Hegelian philosophy into discredit, because they seem to call up the field of association of an extreme *spiritualism*.¹ On the other hand, it was Hegel's theory of *absolute spirit* that initiated the success story of his philosophy. It would be worthwhile reflecting whether perhaps Hegel only survived in the precarious, political as well as scientific and philosophical disputes of the later nineteenth century, in which it allegedly came to the “collapse of German Idealism”, because he spoke of art, religion and philosophy in a completely new and exceedingly vivid way. He has not only founded disciplines such as the history of philosophy in the true sense, but has also – and this is even more important today – had the greatest

¹ The difficulties of translating Hegel's term “Geist” into English are well known. In the following I will consistently use the term “spirit” and will not try to describe possible nuances with “mind”. The translation of Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind* by Wallace and Miller I tacitly change at the passages in question.

interdisciplinary success in the new field of the *humanities*. Art and literature studies, history of religion and religious studies only exist in the wake of Hegel. Critical dissociations from his conception are provisionally passed over here, because they form a natural component of every constructive process of reception. This also includes the current transformation of the humanities into cultural studies, against which I – from Hegel’s point of view – have no objections.

With this short sketch (which might seem harmless at first sight) I have already said two things which will be important in the following and not nearly so harmless. First, I have at once merged Hegel’s “theory of absolute spirit” with Hegel’s three so-called “figures” of *art, revealed religion, and philosophy*. Thus I argue that there is no such thing as a “theory” of absolute spirit that could be identified independently of these three figures. This is also how I explain the often noted fact that Hegel says very little about the absolute spirit as such. In the introductory paragraphs to the philosophy of spirit in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* one learns something about the spirit as well as about the finite, subjective and objective spirit, but apart from a quite opaque definition – that it is “the unity of the objectivity of spirit and of its ideality or concept, a unity that is *in and for itself* and eternally produces itself” (PM, p. 20; GW 20, § 385, p. 383) – nothing about the absolute spirit. The situation is similar in the relevant final chapter of the *Encyclopedia*, whose extremely abbreviated opening passages become even more puzzling than they already are if one takes into account the central changes made in comparison to the Heidelberg *Encyclopedia*.

However, Hegel’s following remarks on the three figures art, revealed religion and philosophy are also extremely brief, which actually only confirms the design of the *Encyclopedia* as a whole to be, according to the title of the book, no more and no less than an “outline” for the more copious treatment in lectures. Secondly, in this sense I have long since referred to the great Berlin lectures and will continue to do so, even with a certain emphasis. The purism of Hans Friedrich Fulda, for example, to completely exclude the lectures from the discussion of the absolute spirit is completely incomprehensible to me, especially since it does not result in a particularly fruitful clarification (Fulda 2003). The problematic text and tradition of the lectures is well known, but not least Walter Jaeschke has reconstructed and made accessible the lecture collection as an integral part of Hegel’s work as far as possible.² I agree with the thesis that Hegel’s philosophy only exists if the lectures are included (Jaeschke 2003, p. 319f.).

2 Cf. the series of Hegel’s *Lectures* published by Felix Meiner Verlag. In addition, the completion

After these necessary preliminary remarks, I turn to the theme of my contribution: *art as the central self-understanding form* (Selbstverständigungsform) of the spirit. I refer to the *Encyclopedia*, but also, in the light of what has just been said, to Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*. At this point, I disagree with the other puristic thesis that only the transcripts are authentic (Gethmann-Siefert 2005), but I adhere (after exact examination of the lecture transcripts) to the edition of Hegel's student and first editor of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Heinrich Gustav Hotho.³ What is decisive here, however, is my third thesis: I will argue that Hegel's theory of absolute spirit does not only not reveal itself independently of the three figures, but that with regard to these figures it *refers decisively* to art and philosophy of art. To put it sharply, I maintain that *the theory of absolute spirit is essentially an aesthetic theory*.

In a first step, I briefly examine the external indications. In the second step, I take advantage of Hegel's claim, which appears to be quite contrary at first sight, that in the case of the *beautiful* (more about this immediately) "it is *not* the absolute spirit which enters into this consciousness" (*PM*, p. 259; *GW* 20, § 557, p. 544). Finally, in the third step, I discuss a problem that arises as the reverse side of my presentation. It will address the question of epistemic standards in their historical dimension.

2 The constitution of the absolute spirit and the liberation of art into a form in its own right

To initiate the first step again drastically: There is no field of the absolute spirit on its own on which one could "then" set up some figures. Nor can one say that the absolute spirit "exists" (or does not exist?) – the danger of such a hypostasis is suggested by many of Hegel's formulations, but he cannot possibly mean the metaphysics of a "Great Spirit". Whether he pursues an alternative metaphysics, I think, as I have explained elsewhere, is highly doubtful, but I will leave this question here to one side (Sandkaulen 2019, pp. 317–335). What since the Heidelberg *Encyclopedia* concludes the "philosophical sciences in outline" with the ab-

of Hegel's *Collected Works* with the second section of critically edited and commented lecture transcripts will soon be reached.

3 Cf. also the recently published commentary volume on Hegel's *Aesthetics*, which comprehensively opens up the Hotho edition in constant comparison with relevant passages of the transcripts (Sandkaulen 2018a), as well as my own commentary on the Introduction to the Hotho edition "about the project of a philosophy of art" (Sandkaulen 2018b), where it becomes particularly clear that Hotho has done a brilliant job.

solute spirit, is obviously foreshadowed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, with two important changes.

First, Hegel expands the field of the absolute in comparison with the *Phenomenology* by interestingly giving up the special status of philosophy (which it has in the *Phenomenology* under the term “absolute knowledge”) together with the separation of religion and philosophy. Second, he emancipates art from its inclusion in religion, which in turn is restricted from this moment on to the revealed, i. e. Christian religion. However, this applies only to the *Encyclopedia*, because the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* for their part begin with natural religion, which leads to a certain parallelism of art and religion forms.

In fact, this has to do with the fact that Hegel remains convinced to the end that art in the emphatic sense cannot be understood without the dimension of the religious. In the Heidelberg *Encyclopedia* the section on art is therefore even yet titled “Religion of Art” and, according to the Berlin version, “the supreme sphere can in general be designated *religion*” (*PM*, p. 257; *GW* 20, § 554, p. 542). If at all, a *general* theory of absolute spirit would have to refer to this distinction of religion, which seems to directly contradict my thesis that in the theory of absolute spirit art plays a decisive role. But this is at most nominally the case. Obviously these are quite diverse homonymous determinations of religion, which must first of all be analyzed in their content and clarified.

Crucial for what I want to say at this point in an initially quite external indexation is that the *constitution* of the absolute spirit in the *Encyclopedia* coincides with the *release* of the aesthetic potentials of that sphere which in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* had been termed comprehensively “religion”. In the term “art religion” the accent shifts from religion to art. This shift in accent, i. e. the *release of art as a figure in its own right*, corresponds to the fact that Hegel gives no less than four lectures in Berlin on the aesthetics or philosophy of art. The productive inclusion of these lectures into the argumentation of the *Encyclopedia* is clearly visible.

3 Intermediate step: The immediacy of art

The second step. In order to make the systematic change in the position of art appear less dramatic, one might suppose that Hegel is merely concerned with clearing up the continuing ambiguity of art and religion. However, I have already emphasized that this would be an underestimation of what is going on: With its emancipation to a figure on its own, art at the same time advances to the *first* figure of the *absolute* spirit. But what does that mean? It is well known that the first is never the perfect with Hegel, and this is also true in the case of

art. Rather, both in the *Encyclopedia* and in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, there is a *teleologically* arranged order that places the three figures, art, revealed religion, and philosophy, in ascending order. I will come back to the historicity of this order; first of all I will focus on the *logic* of this teleology, which in its pointed form can only be found in the *Encyclopedia*.

What is striking here is that Hegel not only describes the form of knowledge in the figure of art as “*immediate*” (*PM*, p. 259; *GW* 20, § 556, p. 543). This immediacy also seems to be of a very peculiar nature. Instead of marking a beginning, which – as always with Hegel – is in *deficit* though at least a *beginning*, art suffers in its immediacy from such strong deficits that on closer inspection it obviously does not yet attain the status of being a figure of the absolute spirit or, inversely, loses it again at the moment of its conquest of this sphere. Hegel literally speaks of the “*finitude of art*” (*PM*, p. 259; *GW* 20, § 556, p. 543), as if it were falling backwards into the finite spirit – but where to actually? Into the objective or subjective spirit, and what would that mean? I have already mentioned that Hegel expressly states that it is “*not the absolute spirit*” that comes into consciousness here (*PM*, p. 259; *GW* 20, § 557, p. 544). A little later, and this is also highly remarkable, a distinction is made between freedom and absoluteness. Beautiful art – what it has to do with beauty, I again pass over – beautiful art, according to Hegel, can therefore “*belong only to those religions in which the principle is the concrete spirituality that has become free within itself, but is not yet absolute*” (*PM*, p. 261; *GW* 20, § 562, p. 547).

And finally: As if Hegel had become aware that it is perhaps not quite plausible to withhold freedom from the dimension of the absolute spirit and to attribute it to a lesser figure, he operates at the end of *Encyclopedia*, § 562, with the figure of “*stages of liberation*”. According to this, beautiful art has achieved “*the purification of the spirit from unfreedom*”, but it is “*only a stage of liberation, not the supreme liberation itself*” (*PM*, p. 262; *GW* 20, § 562, p. 548). Now, one would like to interrupt this presentation at once here and object that the talk of the finiteness of art does not completely match the designation “*liberation stage*”. But this objection would not be of any use here, because the logical-teleological train of the presentation moves on powerfully. “*Beautiful art (like the religion peculiar to it) has its future in genuine religion*” (*PM*, p. 262; *GW* 20, § 563, p. 549). This may and must be understood historically, as will be discussed later. At this point, the accentuation of the logical movement from immediacy to mediation, to “*self-mediating knowledge*”, is sufficient to begin with so that the punch line is strikingly effective: namely the constitution of the absolute spirit which is for that reason *absolute* (and not only “*free*”) because it is “*as absolute spirit [...] for the spirit*” (*PM*, p. 262; *GW* 20, § 563, p. 549).

Spirit is for the spirit: Spirit in the emphatic sense does not “exist” like something one could point to, but spirit in the emphatic sense takes place in the form of the relationship to oneself – in the mode of self-understanding. I deliberately put a fine point on the result of this first stage. It is Hegel’s thesis that in the execution of self-understanding the award of the absolute spirit exists. And at the same time it must be noted that art apparently has no part in this award. It is questionable whether it belongs at all to the figures of the absolute spirit. What is certain is that Hegel explicitly formulates the mode of self-understanding in contrast to art. *Art is not a self-understanding form of the spirit.*

4 Diagnosing differences: The free reality of beauty

Let us take this result as a highly interesting intermediate result. It is remarkable how radically Hegel argues in the *Encyclopedia*, as if the dimension of the absolute spirit in unity with the determination of self-understanding would begin first of all with revealed religion. No less remarkable is the extent to which Hegel varies in characterizing the position of art. This is not the case in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. On the contrary, that art is a figure of the absolute spirit, and precisely for the reason that it is a medium of self-understanding, cannot be called in question:

Now, in this its freedom alone is fine art truly art, and it only fulfils its supreme task when it has placed itself in the same sphere as religion and philosophy, and when it is simply one way of bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit. In works of art the nations have deposited their richest inner intuitions and ideas, and art is often the key, and in many nations the sole key, to understanding their philosophy and religion (*LFA*, p. 7; *TW* 13, p. 20f.; cf. *GW* 28.1, p. 222).

Such statements give me the welcome motive to reverse the sense of direction of Hegel’s remarks in the *Encyclopedia*. It seems obvious to me, following the logic of the *Encyclopedia*, to bind the predicate “absolute” to the execution of self-understanding – spirit is for the spirit. However, contrary to Hegel’s argumentation in the *Encyclopedia*, the genuine form of this is offered by art. As the proprium of art *beauty* thus comes into play.

The term “beautiful art” is used ambiguously in the *Encyclopedia* – perhaps that’s what Hegel is aiming for. On the one hand, “beautiful art” means “classical art” – classical Greek art, which per se refers to the time index of the absolute

spirit. But “fine art” primarily also means the contrast to the purely technical arts and thus emphasizes the quality of beauty as an overarching quality that applies to all three art forms. Following the detailed presentation in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, these three forms are also named in the Berlin *Encyclopedia*: The *symbolic* art of sublimity, the *classical* art of beauty and the *romantic* art (of the unsightly) realize the *ideal of beauty* in different ways. The “whole beauty”, as the Hotho edition says, “decomposes” itself into “its particular determinations”:

This gives, as the *second* part of our study, the doctrine of the *forms of art*. These forms find their origin in the different ways of grasping the Idea as content, whereby a difference in the configuration in which the Idea appears is conditioned. Thus the forms of art are nothing but the different relations of meaning and shape (*LFA*, p. 75; *TW* 13, p. 107).

While the identification of beautiful art with classical art has brought the questionable attribution of *classicism* to Hegel's theory, the overarching determination of beauty offers the decisive and actually fruitful approach on which I rely. As has already been indicated, the ideal of beauty is to be determined as a complete mediation or penetration of two sides – of spiritual content and sensual form, of the idea and its representation. Thus, a content alone is not beautiful independently of its representation (in this sense, the juxtaposition of Hegel's aesthetics as so-called “content aesthetics” with Kant's formal aesthetics is wrong). But also it is not only a certain, harmonious or regular constitution of the form that is beautiful. Finally, beauty is not merely an external, formal connection between any idea and any corresponding form, but rather *the fitting of an idea into the work, which demands to be represented in the form appropriate to it, which it causes to appear concretely and has nothing else for its purpose*. Thus the beautiful structure intentionally consolidates itself, as it were, and separates itself from the world of the finite as a structure in its own right.

In other words: *Beauty in the form of beautiful entities creates its own form of reality*, which appears as its own reality to the same extent that beauty manifests itself in the *self-referential* fit of content and form. That's what matters, and what that means must be clarified more specifically. First and foremost, it seems quite absurd to contaminate, as it were, this reality, as Hegel does in the *Encyclopedia*, with the definition of “finitude”, – by doing so one loses sight of the fact that art objects are essentially no occurrences or products of the first and second nature. I will come back to that. It is also absurd to characterize art somewhat patronizingly as a “liberation stage” – this is too little in view of the fact (we will discuss this below) that art is to be thanked for the genuine *opening up of a sphere of freedom* in the first place, which in turn differs *absolutely* from “liberation stages” of the subjective and objective spirit.

But what Hegel calls the “*immediacy*” of art (*PM*, p. 259; *GW* 20, § 557, p. 543) in order to indicate its deficit, namely, that the absolute spirit does not yet appear in the form of art, I can, on the contrary, take advantage of in the future. In contrast to other uses of immediacy in Hegel (especially at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic*), it is not in the case of art something like an undifferentiated and therefore subcomplex *abstract* determination. On the contrary, Hegel calls the constitution of art immediate, because it creates a reality in the form of intuition which cannot make disappear completely that the fit of idea and form is a matter of the relationship of two sides, namely the *inscription of the spirit in nature in the medium of sensuous expression*. Beyond such representation and its peculiar gradation of difference, the phenomenon of art is literally inconceivable, and the fact that Hegel does take into account this fact of indelible difference is an advantage of his theory which can hardly be overestimated.

As seen, Hegel himself presents this insight that art operates within gradations of difference as the deficit of art, on the basis of which in the *Encyclopedia* it is even denied the status of being a figure of the absolute spirit. For the moment I pass over this in order to first draw attention to Hegel’s diagnosis of difference. It is of the most varied kind. In the spectrum of the various arts (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry), – the discussion is found only in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* – it concerns the whole spectrum of the material used and shaped according to its potentials (light and color, for example, are something other than heavy stone).

The diagnosis of difference also concerns the three art forms, and thus not only symbolic and romantic art, the peculiarity of which, according to Hegel’s argumentation, consists almost in demonstrating differences: In the case of symbolic art, the beautiful fit of idea and form reveals itself as an underdetermined search movement (to be seen, for example, in the enigmatic figure of the Sphinx) and in the case of romantic art as an overdetermined release of random externalities (such as in the depiction of everyday scenarios in painting). What is particularly remarkable, however, is that Hegel also marks a whole series of differences in classically beautiful art or does not exclude classical art from art-like differences (which really should shield him from the label of classicism): the classical “*unity of nature and spirit*” is *only* a *unity* that still allows the difference between the two to be recognized (*PM*, p. 259; *GW* 20, § 557, p. 544). In the serenity of the gods, as the Hotho edition says, the signs of mourning, too, have long been visible:

The blessed gods mourn as it were over their blessedness or their bodily form. We read in their faces the fate that awaits them, and its development, as the actual emergence of that

contradiction between loftiness and particularity, between spirituality and sensuous existence, drags classical art itself to its ruin (*LFA*, p. 485; *TW* 14, p. 86).

Hegel's diagnosis of difference furthermore includes the "disintegration" of art "into a work of external common reality, the subject producing the work, and the intuiting and venerating subject" (*PM*, p. 259; *GW* 20, § 556, p. 543); it includes the situating of art in the horizon of a "limited spirit of a people" (*PM*, p. 260; *GW* 20, § 556, p. 545) and finally it includes the difference that arises in and with the production of art: the difference between the genius in his "un-free passion" and the need for technical abilities in the production of art. "The work of art therefore is just as much a work of free willfulness, and the artist is the master of the god" (*PM*, p. 260; *GW* 20, § 560, p. 545).

There is nothing against reading this astonishing formulation in the sense of a double genitive: The artist does not create the work from arbitrary subjective motifs, but as it were on behalf of "God". However, just as much and even more in reverse, the representation of the idea – the representation of that which manifests itself in a culture as "the God" – is an idea first and foremost produced by art, existing in no way independently of its artistic expression. Quite unencumbered by the critical stance of the *Encyclopedia* this is formulated in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* as follows:

Yet when art is present in its supreme perfection, then precisely in its figurative mode it contains the kind of exposition most essential to and most in correspondence with the content of truth. Thus, for example, in the case of the Greeks, art was the highest form in which the people represented the gods to themselves and gave themselves some awareness of truth. This is why the poets and artists became for the Greeks the creators of their gods, i. e. the artists gave the nation a definite idea of the behaviour, life, and effectiveness of the Divine, or, in other words, the definite content of religion. And it was not as if these ideas and doctrines were already there, in advance of poetry, in an abstract mode of consciousness as general religious propositions and categories of thought, and then later were only clothed in imagery by artists and given an external adornment in poetry; on the contrary, the mode of artistic production was such that what fermented in these poets they could work out only in this form of art and poetry (*LFA*, p. 102; *TWA* 13, p. 140f.).

5 Self-understanding: The theory of absolute spirit as aesthetic theory

But what else – and with this I conclude this step – could this be than the *self-understanding of the spirit*? Art, as I had earlier put it, opens up a genuine sphere of freedom – now, with reference to the peculiar difference between spirit and

nature that is characteristic of art, I think this makes good sense. The difference, not less than the “*absolute negativity*”, belongs from the beginning to Hegel’s determination of the spirit as the Other of Nature (*PM*, p. 9; *GW* 20, § 381ff., p. 381f.). The stages of liberation of the subjective and objective spirit do not annul the reference to nature, but reveal the spirit in the “*positing* of nature as *its world*”, which “as reflection is at the same time the *presupposition* of the world as independent nature” (*PM*, p. 18; *GW* 20, § 384, p. 382). The achievement – and, as one should obviously add, the continuing challenge – of art is to realize this transformation of nature for the first time, while preserving difference, as “*Im-Andern-bei-sich-Selber-Sein*”.

I say *for the first time* compared to the subjective and objective spirit, because art (apart from decorative, wellness-promoting and moral instrumentalizations of art)⁴ pursues no other purpose than that of cultural self-assurance. Literally for nothing else is the beautiful “good”, it has no extrinsic benefit or purpose, it is relieved of any instrumental aspects. And so it relieves those who gain the freedom in the “realm of beauty” to become aware of who they are and what interests them most, which can happen either in agreement or in explicit contrast to the political situation of a society. What “is man’s *need* to produce works of art?”, Hegel asks in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, in order to answer most vividly in the sense of a cultural-anthropological constant:

That man is a *thinking* consciousness, i. e. that man draws out of himself and puts *before himself* what he is and whatever else is. Things in nature are only *immediate* and *once*, while man as spirit *duplicates* himself, in that he is as things in nature, but he is just as much *for himself*; he sees himself, represents himself to himself, thinks, and only on the strength of this active placing himself before himself is he spirit (*LFA*, p. 30f.; *TWA* 13, p. 50f.; cf. *GW* 28.1, p. 229).⁵

Why and to what extent I support the thesis that Hegel’s theory of absolute spirit is, at its core, an aesthetic theory has thus, I hope, become clear. According to Hegel, self-understanding is not a process in the closed space of the subject, but rather a process of recognition in the medially mediated mode of reduplica-

⁴ In the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel explicitly distinguishes “free art” from such instrumental uses of art (cf. Sandkaulen 2018b, p. 6ff.).

⁵ Cf. the original text in German: “Das allgemeine und absolute Bedürfnis, aus dem die Kunst [...] quillt, findet seinen Ursprung darin, daß der Mensch *denkendes* Bewußtsein ist, d. h. daß er, was er ist und was überhaupt ist, aus sich selbst *für sich* macht. Die Naturdinge sind nur *unmittelbar* und *einmal*, doch der Mensch als Geist *verdoppelt* sich, indem er zunächst wie die Naturdinge *ist*, sodann aber ebenso sehr *für sich* ist, sich anschaut, sich vorstellt, denkt und nur durch dies tätige Fürsichsein Geist ist”.

tion (*Verdopplung*). In the thematization and treatment of the difference between spirit and nature, art is not only the *genuine* form but in the historical process of cultures it is also seen as the *original* form, in which the reduplication in the conjunction of the negativity of spirit with the self-referentiality of beauty becomes vividly apparent. Why does Hegel exclude this wonderful finding in the *Encyclopedia* from the absolute spirit?

Obviously he is convinced that self-understanding is only really given when the spirit is completely with itself – without the reference to nature in the medium of the sensual, as it were, intervening. I am not sure whether this idea of total self-presence – even if it should eventually take place in “pure thought” – is at all attainable and desirable. It is, however, indispensable to state that Hegel can only then, if the aesthetic doubling opens up the sphere of the absolute spirit, assert that revealed religion is not about the retreat into total inwardness, but is also for its part a figure of this world – and likewise philosophy, which Hegel then actually determines as “unity of art and religion” (*PM*, p. 267; *GW* 20, § 572, p. 554).

6 Self-understanding once again: Aporia in historical regard

With a short third step I will conclude my considerations. This is about the historical constitution of the absolute spirit, which has already been mentioned here several times and which is inscribed in the logical-teleological presentation. Perhaps a concept like Kant's transcendental aesthetics is not affected by history, but I doubt it. At any rate it is clear that Hegel pursues in contrast to Kant a thoroughly cultural conception which is unthinkable without historical reference and locates art, religion and philosophy in the process from the oldest cultures via Greek antiquity to modernity. As far as art is concerned in this process, it supposedly coincides with the infamous “end of art” in the result, something that Hegel, however, does not say at all. In the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel speaks of the “past of art”, which fits in mirror image with the mentioned thesis in the *Encyclopedia* of the “future” of art in religion (Sandkaulen 2018b, p. 11 ff.). I don't want to deal here with the thesis of the past of art as such, or with the notorious question of what art in modernity is all about. If art is to be understood as a genuine and original form of self-understanding of the spirit in the dimension of the representation of cultures, then, I think, Hegel's thesis makes sense that, at the latest in modernity (according to Hegel, at the latest since the Reformation), it

can no longer assert such a “claim to sole representation”, even though of course it still exists.

But there is something else here which concerns me. The fact that Hegel speaks once of the “future” and once of the “past” with regard to art is connected with the different perspectives of the systemic form of the *Encyclopedia* on the one hand and the extra-systemic form of the *Lectures on Aesthetics* on the other, on which Hegel methodically reflected thoroughly in each case. Thus, the following problem does not seem to arise in the course of the system, which is quite obtrusive in the lectures – but which Hegel does not address satisfactorily here either. In contrast to the teleological-historical development of the figures in the system, the *Lectures on Aesthetics* speak from *the point of view of the present*, into which we can easily include our own present. This means: *For us*, for Hegel, for his audience and for us in the year 2018 and following, art in the full sense of its possibilities lies in the past – but in what epistemic mode can we understand this and, even more, integrate it into our own current self-understanding as a substantial (and as always possibly controversial) moment of our cultural identity?

The epistemic mode of intuition named by Hegel in the *Encyclopedia* does not solve the problem, but indicates it. According to Hegel, art has moved into the past precisely because, in a process of radical rationalization, we have outgrown the world view of intuition and poetic imagination and have left the form of intuition behind us. Instead of in the form of intuition, we find ourselves in the state of reflection. Hegel uses the expression “prose” for this. At first glance this is plausible, on closer inspection the expression is opaque. It does not explain in which mental attitude participants of prosaic living conditions can apparently nevertheless be impressed by art of Greek antiquity or Italian painting however broken by historical distance, nor does it explain whether and to what extent the concept (*der Begriff*), named by Hegel the epistemic mode of philosophy, is a case of rational prose. Finally, it remains unclear whether the unity of art and religion claimed for philosophy, which includes “a spiritual *intuition*” (*PM*, p. 267; *GW* 20, § 572, p. 554), represents an exclusive philosophical knowledge or whether it is a knowledge that can be presupposed as generally communicable in the culture of the present and can be mobilized, so to speak, in the interest of a reflected appropriation of the past.

Once again I would like to make a particular point about the following: It is clear that Hegel’s theory of absolute spirit is about cultural self-understanding. I hope to have shown that the original and structurally decisive mode of this self-understanding is an aesthetic action. However, the self-understanding about the

conditions of appreciation of and participation in this action of aesthetic self-understanding seems to me to be the blind spot in Hegel's theory.⁶

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⁶ Stephan Otto has discussed an analogous difficulty with reference to Hegel's psychology in its passage from intuition via imagination to thinking (Otto 2007, pp. 34–50).